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Water board wants chromium 6 removed

Contamination near Needles prompts panel to draft cleanup order for PG&E

By Benjamin Spillman
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The local branch of a state water quality board wants a toxic chemical removed from groundwater beneath an isolated, desert energy station so it won't seep closer to the Colorado River.

Staffers at the Colorado River Basin Region of the California Regional Water Quality Control Board want Pacific Gas and Electric Co. to start cleaning an underground plume of chromium 6 that has contaminated water in an aquifer near Needles.

They've drafted an order that outlines a cleanup plan but have not yet enacted the measure. The draft was distributed to the board Wednesday.

"It is our tool, I guess, for cleanups," said Robert Perdue, an assistant executive for the water quality board's regional branch.

There is no evidence the plume has reached the Colorado, but the regulatory effort has caught the attention of Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, the state's largest water agency.

Metropolitan, which delivers water to about 18 million people around Los Angeles, deployed a team of consultants to the Wednesday board meeting in La Quinta.

"We would see this in the same way we see the uranium tailings in Moab, Utah, or the perchlorate coming out of Henderson, Nev.," said Metropolitan spokesman Adán Ortega, citing two prominent sources of river water contamination. Perchlorate, a chemical used in rocket fuel, seeps from a defunct factory into the river. Traces have appeared in downstream wells -- including some in the Coachella Valley.

Unlike perchlorate, however, chromium 6 has not shown up downstream.

But just as one group of water quality regulators is raising red flags about the PG&E site, another agency says it already has prompted the company to embark on the cleanup effort, albeit on a slower schedule.

One official at the state's Department of Toxic Substances Control wrote that the water quality board's suggestion that chromium approaching the river caused "undue alarm" among water users.

"Given the already heightened public concern over the perchlorate contamination affecting the Colorado River, (state regulators) have a common responsibility to protect the public from unnecessary hysteria based on inaccurate information about the PG&E investigation," wrote Karen Baker, head of the toxic substances department, in a June 23 letter to Phil Gruenberg, chief of the local branch of the water quality board.

The two agencies held a teleconference on the issue after the board meeting.

PG&E and chromium 6 gained notoriety for a groundwater contamination incident in the Mojave desert town of Hinkley. The contamination and efforts to wrest a $333 million settlement from the company were dramatized in the 2000 Julia Roberts' movie, "Erin Brockovich."

Baker's department has led cleanup efforts at the Needles site on behalf of the government since 1996 and

workers there report the company has cooperated throughout the process.

They expect PG&E's $5 million to $8 million decontamination project to start bearing fruit in early 2005, one year after the water quality board wants results.

"We don't believe it is getting to the river," said Aaron Yue, who works in the geology and corrective action branch for the toxic substances department.

A representative for PG&E was not available for comment.

The site in question is PG&E's Topock Compressor Station 15 miles east of Needles on land owned by the Bureau of Land Management.

The station compresses natural gas before it is sent through pipelines to PG&E territory in central and northern California.

From 1951 to 1985, the company used a chemical containing chromium to prevent corrosion in the compressor's works. Until the 1960s, the water quality board says PG&E dumped untreated wastewater into a wash they say drains to the river.

According to the toxic substances department, there is an isolated plume near Needles of groundwater 2,500 feet long and 2,000 feet wide that is contaminated beyond the 50 part per billion standard for drinking water.

At its center, there is a concentration rate of 13,000 parts per billion, said Alfredo Zanoria, a toxic substances department geologist working on the project.

But the desolate location of the site means few, if any, people have ingested any of the water, Zanoria said.

Nor is it known to be used for any agricultural or business purposes, he said.

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